



Think Long

Behar - 10 May 2014 / 10 Iyar 5774

In last week's parsha and this there are two quite similar commands, both of which have to do with counting time. Last week we read about the counting of the omer, the forty nine days between the second day of Pesach and Shavuot:

From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord. (Lev. 23: 15-16)

This week we read about the counting of the years to the Jubilee:

Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. (Lev. 25: 8-10)

There is, though, one significant difference between the two acts of counting, and it tends to be missed in translation. The counting of the Omer is in the plural: *u-sefartem lakhem*. The counting of the years is in the singular: *vesafarta lekha*. Oral tradition interpreted the difference as referring to who is to do the counting. In the case of the Omer, the counting is a duty of each individual.¹ Hence the use of the plural. In the case of the Jubilee, the counting is the responsibility of the

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¹ Menachot 65b.

Bet Din, specifically the supreme court, the Sanhedrin.² It is the duty of the Jewish people as a whole, performed centrally on their behalf by the court. Hence the singular.

Implicit here is an important principle of leadership. As individuals we count the days, but as leaders we must count the years. As private persons we can think about tomorrow, but in our role as leaders we must think long-term, focusing our eyes on the far horizon. “Who is wise?” asked Ben Zoma, and answered: “One who foresees the consequences.”³ Leaders, if they are wise, think about the impact of their decisions many years from now. Famously, when asked in the 1970s what he thought about the French Revolution in 1789, Chinese leader Zhou Enlai replied: “Too soon to say.”⁴

Jewish history is replete with just such long-term thinking. When Moses, on the eve of the exodus, focused the attention of the Israelites on how they would tell the story to their children in the years to come, he was taking the first step to making Judaism a religion built on education, study and the life of the mind, one of its most profound and empowering insights.

“One of Judaism’s most profound and empowering insights is that it is a religion built on education, study and the life of the mind.”

Throughout the book of Devarim he exhibits stunning insight when he says that the Israelites will find that their real challenge will be not slavery but freedom, not poverty but affluence, and not homelessness but home. Anticipating by two millennia the theory of the 14th century Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun, he predicts that over the course of time, precisely as they succeed, the Israelites will be at risk of losing their *asabiyah* or social cohesion and solidarity as a group. To prevent this he sets forth a way of life built on covenant, memory, collective responsibility, justice, welfare and social inclusion – still, to this day, the most powerful formula ever devised for a strong civil society.

When the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah went into exile to Babylon, it was the foresight of Jeremiah, expressed in his letter to the exiles,⁵ that became the first ever expression of the idea of a creative minority. The people could maintain their identity there, he said, while working for the benefit of society as a whole, and eventually they would return. It was a remarkable prescription, and has guided Jewish communities in the Diaspora for the twenty-six centuries since.

When Ezra and Nehemiah gathered the people to the Water Gate in Jerusalem in the mid-fifth century BCE and gave them the world’s first adult education seminar,⁶ they were

² Sifra, Behar 2: 2, Maimonides, Hilkhoh Shemittah ve-Yovel 10:1.

³ Tamid 32a.

⁴ Truth to tell, the conversation was probably not about the Revolution in 1789 but about the Paris students’ revolt of 1968, just a few years earlier. Still, as they say, some stories are true even if they did not happen.

⁵ Jeremiah 29: 1-8.

⁶ Nehemiah 8.

signaling a truth that would only become apparent several centuries later in Hellenistic times, that the real battle that would determine the future of the Jewish people was cultural rather than military. The Maccabees won the military struggle against the Seleucids, but the Hasmonean monarchy that ensued eventually became Hellenised itself.

When Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said to Vespasian, the Roman general leading the siege against Jerusalem, “Give me Yavneh and its sages,”⁷ he was saving the Jewish future by ensuring that an ongoing source of spiritual and intellectual leadership would remain.

Among the most prescient of all Jewish leaders were the rabbis of the first two centuries of the Common Era. It was they who ordered the great traditions of the Oral Law into the disciplined structure that became the Mishnah and subsequently the Talmud; they who developed textual study into an entire religious culture; they who developed the architectonics of prayer into a form eventually followed by Jewish communities throughout the world; and they who developed the elaborate system of rabbinic halakhah as a “fence around the law.”⁸ They did what no other religious leadership has ever succeeded in doing, honing and refining a way of life capable of sustaining a nation in exile and dispersion for two thousand years.

In the early nineteenth century, when rabbis like Zvi Hirsch Kalisher and Yehudah Alkalai began to argue for a return to Zion, they inspired secular figures like Moses Hess (and later Yehudah Leib Pinsker and Theodor Herzl), and even non-Jews like George Eliot, whose *Daniel Deronda* (1876) was one of the first Zionist novels. That movement ensured that there was a Jewish population there, able to settle and build the land so that there could one day be a State of Israel.

When the yeshiva heads and Hassidic leaders who survived the Holocaust encouraged their followers to marry and have children and rebuild their shattered worlds, they gave rise to what has become the single fastest growing element in Jewish life. Because of them there are now, within living memory of the almost total destruction of the great centres of Jewish learning in Eastern Europe, more Jews studying at yeshivah or seminary than at any time in the whole of Jewish history – more than in the great days of the nineteenth century yeshivot at Volozhyn, Ponevez and Mir, more even than in the days of the academies at Sura and Pumbedita that produced the Babylonian Talmud.

Great leaders think long-term and build for the future. That has become all too rare in contemporary secular culture with its relentless focus on the moment, its short attention spans, its fleeting fashions and flash mobs, its texts and tweets, its fifteen-minutes of fame, and its fixation with today’s headlines and “the

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⁷ Gittin 56b.

⁸ Avot 1: 1.

power of now.”

Nonetheless the real business leaders of today are those who play the longest of long games. Bill Gates of Microsoft, Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com, Larry Page and Sergei Brin of Google, and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, were all prepared to wait a long time before monetizing their creations. Amazon.com, for example, was launched in 1995 and did not show a profit until the last quarter of 2001. Even by historic standards, these were exceptional instances of long-term thinking and planning.

Though they are secular examples, and though in any case we have not had prophets since the Second Temple, there is nothing intrinsically mysterious about being able to foresee the consequences of choosing this way rather than that. Understanding the future is based on deep study of the past. Chess masters have committed so many classic games to memory that they can almost instantly tell by looking at the placing of the pieces on a board, how to win and in how many moves. Warren Buffett spent so many hours and years as a young man reading corporate annual accounts that he developed a finely honed ability to pick companies poised for growth. Already in 2002, five years before the financial collapse actually came, he was warning that derivatives and the securitization of risk were “financial weapons of mass destruction,” a secular prophecy that was both true and unheeded.

Throughout my years in the Chief Rabbinate our team – and I believe leadership must always be a team enterprise – would always ask: how will this affect the Jewish community twenty-five years from now? Our task was to build not for us but for our children and grandchildren. The great systemic challenge was to move from a community proud of its past to one focused on its future. That is why we chose to express our mission in the form of a question: Will we have Jewish grandchildren?

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